Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 4, 2017

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation in Venezuela and respectfully urge your Administration to push for a comprehensive review of the humanitarian situation in Venezuela at the United Nations Security Council. We also ask that new sanctions be applied against several individuals, particularly those responsible for human rights violations carried out by state security forces or their enablers, including the *colectivos* (violent militias armed by Venezuelan authorities) at recent protests.

Most recently, Maduro's proposal of a constitutional assembly is a clear subterfuge designed to consolidate power and avoid democratic elections. Venezuelan authorities will handpick assembly members to impose their own agenda and will therefore disenfranchise the people of Venezuela. This fraud must be strongly repudiated by the United States government and the international community.

While Congress and the Administration justifiably have focused our efforts on human rights and democracy in Venezuela, we are also deeply concerned by the food and medical shortages that are plaguing the country's population on a daily basis. The humanitarian situation in Venezuela is dire, evident by the over 18,000 asylum requests from Venezuelans seeking to enter the U.S. in 2016, which, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, was the highest number of requests made by any nationality last year.

We, therefore, urge your Administration to task our U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations to secure the votes to place the situation in Venezuela on the agenda of the U.N. Security Council and then to use her voice, vote, and influence to push the Security Council to issue a Presidential Statement urging the Venezuelan authorities to allow the delivery of humanitarian relief and to lift bureaucratic impediments or any other imposed obstacles so that independent non-governmental organizations can provide the proper assistance to the people of Venezuela without any interference by the country's authorities.

If Venezuela's authorities refuse to provide open access for humanitarian relief, we believe that the United States should push for the adoption of a Resolution at the U.N. Security Council directing Venezuelan authorities to promptly allow safe and unhindered access for humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners, including possible support from neighboring countries. The Resolution also should call on the Venezuelan authorities to (1) allow the delivery of food and medicine; (2) end human rights violations; (3) agree to free, fair, and transparent elections with credible international observers; (4) cease violence and (5) release all political prisoners.

At the same time, there are other steps that the United States can take to address the situation in Venezuela. For the last five weeks, the people of Venezuela have been demonstrating peacefully against the authoritarian rule of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro and have been met with violence that has caused 34 deaths, over 1,600 imprisonments with 724 individuals remaining in jail, and hundreds of injuries. Those carrying out or authorizing violence against peaceful protestors must be sanctioned immediately.

Additional sanctions could be applied to a number of officials, including (1) members of the Venezuelan Supreme Tribunal of Justice who attempted to strip powers away from the country's National Assembly, whose powers have been illegally and unconstitutionally diminished; (2) authorities responsible for banning opposition leader Henrique Capriles from running for office for 15 years; (3) and public officials responsible for the repression and imprisonment of over 175 political prisoners currently held and some even tortured in Venezuela.

These additional sanctions would make clear our strong concern with the dire situation faced by political prisoners in the country. Some of these prisoners have release orders, but the Venezuelan Intelligence Service (SEBIN) prevents them from being released. Making matters worse, Venezuelan authorities have prevented family members and attorneys for political prisoner Leopoldo Lopez from seeing him since April 7, 2017, and U.S. citizen Joshua Holt unjustly has been held for nearly one year. We believe that Mr. Holt must be unconditionally released immediately on humanitarian grounds.

We were disappointed when Venezuelan leaders expressed their intent to withdraw from the Organization of American States (OAS). The OAS has been instrumental in keeping pressure on Maduro and his high ranking officials and reporting on the human rights violations committed within Venezuela.
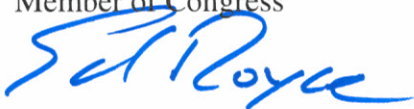
It is vital for your Administration to take a dual track approach to the current situation in Venezuela in order to ease the dire humanitarian situation and to hold Maduro and his high ranking officials accountable for the human rights abuses it commits. We firmly believe that Venezuelan authorities must authorize and allow humanitarian agencies to operate in Venezuela independently and without the interference or harassment of Maduro or any other high ranking official. While the OAS and its Member States have very effectively responded to the Venezuela situation, we believe it is time for the United Nations to significantly increase pressure on Maduro, particularly with regard to the country's humanitarian needs.

Thank you for your attention to these important matters.

Sincerely,

ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN
Member of Congress

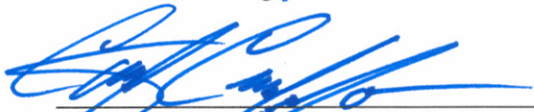ELIOT L. ENGEL
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